

Cooperative Learning: New Promise for Today's Diverse Classrooms

Collaborative learning techniques can maximize learning outcomes.

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Cooperative learning has an important role to play in a restructured learning environment. Several decades of research have proved that cooperative learning—where teachers combine small, heterogeneous groups of students who work together to achieve a common goal—is an effective teaching strategy. Studies conducted in all major subject areas at all grade levels, at all types of schools, and for all types of learners have shown that achievement increases and interpersonal relationships improve when students are involved in cooperative learning activities.

All students can benefit from cooperative learning regardless of academic ability or ethnic background, making it an effective strategy in today's typically diverse classrooms. According to Stevens and Slavin (1995), for example, "cooperative learning experiences promote higher achievement and greater retention than do individualistic learning experiences for all students."

The STAD Approach

One of the most straightforward approaches to cooperative learning was developed by Robert Slavin and his colleagues at Johns Hopkins University. Known as Student Teams-Achievement Divisions (STAD), it is one of a set of collaborative learning techniques known as student team learning. The STAD approach involves dividing students into four- or five-member learning teams. Each team includes boys and girls, members of the different racial or ethnic groups represented in the classroom, and students with different levels of ability (Slavin, 1990).

Once the teacher has taught the lesson, the students work together in their groups. They use worksheets to guide their efforts and use tutoring, quizzes, and group discussion to ensure that each member of their team masters what was taught. Stu-

dents then are tested on the material and each receives an improvement score that reflects the degree to which he or she exceeded past averages.

According to Slavin (1996), there are three concepts central to all student team learning methods: team rewards, individual accountability, and equal opportunities for success.

William Glasser (1986) notes that the motivation of elementary school students to work depends on the extent to which their basic psychological needs are met, and that cooperative learning "increases student motivation by providing peer support."

There also has been considerable attention focused on the benefits of cooperative learning for students with learning disabilities. Not only do they benefit from working with their non-disabled peers, but all students benefit from working with—and getting to know and understand—one another.

A New Focus for Research

Recently, researchers have begun to look at how cooperative learning outcomes vary according to race. One study found that many black students are more communally oriented than their white counterparts—possibly due in part to experience in large, extended families and close ties to their church. As a result, these students often do better in cooperative learning groups (Hurley, Allen, & Boykin, 2009).

Hurley and his colleagues divided 132 black and white fourth- and fifth-grade students from an urban school in the Northeast into racially homogeneous groups. They studied math estimation in one of three learning contexts: intergroup competitive, interpersonally competitive, and cooperative—no reward. Although all of the students performed at about the same level on

a post-test, some marked differences were noted when students of different racial groups worked under different conditions. While the white students did their best after working in the interpersonally competitive groups, the black students did their best after working in the cooperative learning groups (Hurley, Allen, & Boykin, 2009).

An earlier study (Ellison, Boykin, Tyler, & Dillhunt, 2005), involved 138 low-income fifth- and sixth-grade black and white students. In general, the results indicated that all the participants preferred cooperative learning to competitive and individualistic learning. However, the black students reported significantly higher preferences for cooperative learning than did the white students.

The bottom line: “Understanding the learning preferences of an ever-increasing, ethnically diverse student population may have important implications for teaching and learning. This information may advance educators’ understanding of how to restructure learning environments to maximize achievement outcomes” (Ellison, Boykin, Tyler, & Dillhunt, 2005)

From the research that has been done to date, it appears that cooperative learning will have an important role to play in that restructured learning environment.

References

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